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ABSTRACT

Suggesting that properly designed and thoughtfully implemented discussion tasks can be an effective learning tool, this Digest discusses a learning-through-discussion framework that is designed to promote creativity and generate meaningful interaction and understanding for the learner. It discusses that goals of discussion and describes four discussion tasks (guided, inquiry-based, reflective, and exploratory). It concludes that such tasks can help students attain the learning goals of critical inquiry, debate, and reflection. Contains annotations of 5 online resources for teachers and 5 references. (RS)

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Learning Through Discussion: Designing Tasks for Critical Inquiry and Reflective Learning

by Karen Ngeow and Yoon-San Kong

Goals of discussion

Discussion is very often used as a tool in classrooms. When designed properly and used thoughtfully, discussion tasks can be an effective learning tool that promote creativity, as well as generate meaningful interaction and understanding for the learner. Well-designed discussion tasks lead to progressive knowledge-seeking inquiry (Scardamalia & Bereiter, 1994) or expansive learning (Engeström, 1999) where learners are actively synthesizing new information with prior knowledge and experiences in the process of creating not only new knowledge but also new understanding of the learning process.

Teachers use discussion tasks to achieve different goals: critical inquiry, debate and reflection. However, it is not difficult to ensure that "learning" will naturally occur in a discussion task. Perkins (1986) reminds teachers that the meaningfulness of a task is not found in the problem or task itself; rather, the learner has to impose his or her own meanings and defines individual goals during the process of accomplishing the task. In other words, the purpose of learning within this context is not to "get it right," but to produce something meaningful through critical inquiry, debate and reflection.

Types of discussion tasks

The move to understanding discussion as more than an instructional tool that encourages learners to talk has implications for the design of discussion tasks. Hacker and Niederhauser (2000) argue that effective learning comes about through teachers' thoughtful design and use of instructional strategies.

Below are four major discussion tasks designed for classroom use, with a description of teachers' roles and learning strategies to be adopted by the discussants.

Guided discussion task

The goal of guided or directed discussion tasks is to give learners a chance to develop critical thinking, clear oral expression, as well as experience in posing and responding to questions.

Stage 1	The teacher poses a discussion question to the whole class. Guidelines are given on discussion etiquette and criteria for evaluation. Each learner contributes an original answer in response to the discussion question.
Stage 2	Learners offer responses or questions to each other's contributions as a means of broadening the discussion's scope.
Stage 3	Learners present their views or the views of their groups, either orally or in writing at the end of the guided discussion task.

Inquiry-based discussion task

This task guides learners through a series of questions to discover some relationship or principle, and to help learners acquire reasoning skills to analyze new information. The beginning stages are similar to those in the guided discussion task, but in an inquiry-based discussion task, learners are further required to bring in information and issues from outside the textbook or classroom for discussion.

Stage 4	The teacher poses a discussion issue that requires argumentative reasoning and elaboration. Learners are required to go beyond the textbook to evaluate this discussion issue.
Stage 5	Learners identify and highlight main issues relevant to the discussion. In doing so, they appraise the new information they have acquired for its validity and relevance as well as test their ideas against insights and perspectives provided by their peers.
Stage 6	Learners summarize the discussion in light of other discussants' reactions and interpretations. This helps them to synthesize supporting and opposing ideas that are relevant to the issue.

Reflective discussion task

Teachers use this task to help learners become more cognizant of the learning process and to enable them to derive meaningful insights from their learning experiences.

Stage 7	The teacher asks learners to prepare a self-analysis of their roles and contributions to the discussion process.
Stage 8	Learners analyze "how they learn" and think about what will help them be more effective in future discussions. They respond to introspective questions that help them to reflect on conditions that facilitated or hindered their learning processes.

Exploratory discussion task

This task assists learners by honing their analytical skills to arrive at alternative explanations in a variety of real-world scenarios. Here, learners are compelled to first examine their personal opinions, suppositions or assumptions and then visualize alternatives to these assumptions.

Stage 9	The teacher poses a real-world problem that requires learners to consider- in context - the premises or ideas they have been discussing.
Stage 10	Learners assess their beliefs or opinions and evaluate how alternatives to these beliefs and opinions apply in a variety of real-world situations.

Conclusion

The learning-through-discussion framework shares aspects of Bereiter's (1994) concept of progressive discourse, where the goals are for learners to first develop their individual thinking, then suspend these opinions to consider alternatives, and later negotiate meaning with other discussants to arrive at a shared understanding of the issues at hand. With thoughtful and well-designed discussion tasks, teachers can help students attain learning goals of critical inquiry, debate and reflection.

Online resources for teachers

Using Questioning and Discussion in the Classroom: Resources compiled by the UMDNJ Academic Information Technology Advisory Committee. This site contains key aspects of successful discussions and an FAQ list for teachers interested in using discussions.
http://www.umdnj.edu/meg/traditional_discussion_questioning.htm

Fostering Effective Classroom Discussions: A selective list of online resources - by Barton, Heilker and Rutkowski. Of particular interest here are sites on the use of questioning techniques that facilitate good discussion practices.
http://www.mhhe.com/socscience/english/tc/pt/discussion/resources.htm

Class Discussions - by The Center for the Advancement of Teaching, Illinois State University. This site has resources on using icebreakers and group activities to facilitate collaboration amongst students in discussion activities.
http://www.cat.ilstu.edu/teaching_tips/classd.shtml

Assessing Discussion: Active and Collaborative Learning. This is a resource site for Valencia faculty. It has an instrument and some assessment guidelines for evaluating student contributions in class discussions.
http://faculty.valencia.cc.fl.us/pbishop/lcrb/lcrsrc_clsinter.htm

Classroom Discussion Rubrics. This site has two assessment rubrics, complete with descriptors that teachers can adapt to suit their assessment of students' efforts in their classroom discussion tasks.
http://www.phschool.com/professional_development/rubrics/classroom_discussion.pdf

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